

The long wait is over

Tracie Skinner submitted this "Bragging Rights" about her husband, Staff Sgt. Jeff Skinner of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 185th Aviation Group, Company G, of Meridian. By the time this special edition is published, Jeff will probably already be home. His scheduled return date was Feb. 18.

By Tracie Skinner
special to The Star

Jeffrey Skinner is an honest, hard-working and dedicated American who truly believes in

giving his all for his country.

Jeff is a wonderful family man. He is a devoted father to three energetic and beautiful girls. He is a loyal son who loves and respects his mother with intensity. He is a cherished and understanding brother. He understands the need to be there for his siblings. He hurts when they hurt. He cries when they cry and he laughs when they laugh.

Most of all he is a kind, considerate, faithful and loving husband. All of his family is anxiously awaiting his return home.

Jeff is a hard worker and a dedicated employee of the Mississippi Army Guard. Not only is this a way of making a living for Jeff and his family, but it is a job that he enjoys doing. Jeff is willing to that extra mile to assure that he is doing a quality job.

Jeff is a true friend. He enjoys being with his friends during the fun times, but he's also going to be there during the down times. He treats all his friends (as well as those he hasn't made yet) with dignity and respect. Jeff can never be considered a fair weather friend. He'll always be there to the end.

Jeff's most outstanding trait is that of being a loyal and faithful American. Jeff is devoted to giving his all to his God and country. Jeff never questioned the rightness of the decisions of his commander in chief. He feels it his duty to be a good soldier.

He left home with the desire and the determination to do the best job that could be done in the fight for freedom. He believes in the cause and he respects his commanders. Above all, he has faith that his God is looking after him and keeping him safe.

We love you, Jeff.

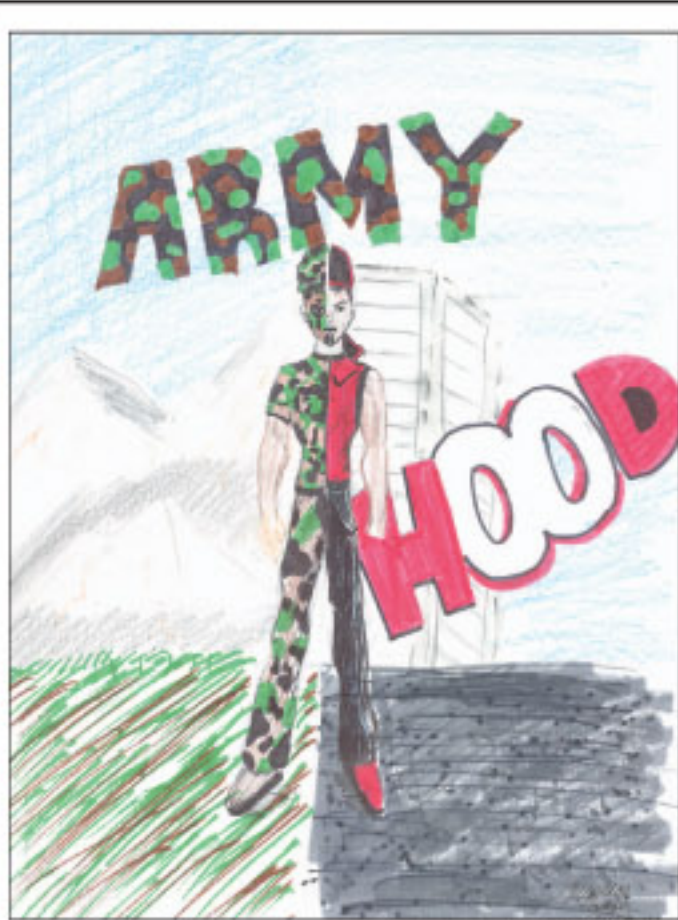


ILLUSTRATION BY MAURICE HODGES

FROM MY HEART

Northwest Junior High School art students were asked to draw pictures to salute U.S. troops. Here's what Maurice Hodges, an eighth-grader, said about his artwork: "The theme I made up came directly from my heart. I believe that there is a line drawn between the U.S. Army and what some people call 'the hood.' Many people would be better off in the Army than on the street. If you are on the street, you are most likely going to be caught doing something against the law. If you are in the Army, you will have pride and honor. I would like to give a shout out to everybody in the Army. I love y'all and keep up the good work."



ILLUSTRATION BY DELTON HARRISON

UNCLE DAVID

Delton Harrison of Little Rock is a fourth-grader at Newton County Elementary School. His parents are Glen and Dawn Harrison; he has a twin sister, Lacye, and a 3-year-old brother, Heston. He likes to draw, read and play video games, and he wants to be a writer when he grows up. His drawing is of his uncle, Capt. David Alexander of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 204th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, 1st Battalion. When he's not on active duty, the 29-year-old full-time Guardsman lives in Newton with his wife, Robin, and two children, Josh and Mollie.



Harrison

Lt. Kevin Hendricks is a Naval flight instructor attached to Training Squadron 7 at Naval Air Station Meridian. He and his wife, Gail, moved to Meridian in September 2004. This is Kevin's second tour at NAS Meridian; the first time, he was a student pilot.

By Kevin Hendricks
special to The Star

As a Naval flight instructor attached to VT-7 at NAS Meridian, I am currently on my "shore tour" and do not have the responsibility of deploying with a squadron.

My wife, Gail, and I recently moved here from Washington state, where I spent three years of my "sea tour" flying the EA-6B Prowler, a radar-jamming aircraft that escorts bombers and fighters into harm's way.

It just so happened that my first deployment in the Prowler coincided with the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Reflecting over the events of that cruise with the "Lancers" of VAQ-131, one incident especially stands out in my mind — the implosion of my jet's nose just south of Baghdad.

On March 28, 2003, I was aboard the mighty USS Constellation attached to Carrier Air Wing 2, on station in the Persian Gulf along with the USS Lincoln and USS Kitty Hawk. Our mission was to provide electronic jamming support for night strike aircraft from my carrier group.

Thinking through the possibilities

Getting prepared for combat, you train for various types of missions and situations you could find yourself in while airborne.

Personally, I concentrated on evasive maneuvering from surface-to-air missiles, knowing there was a good chance we would be putting it to use. As aviators, we considered how we would deal with all kinds of aircraft damage — ranging from bringing a crippled jet back to the ship or ejecting and evading the enemy on the ground.

Despite my preparations, I never thought I might have to ride the rails just south of Baghdad because of bad weather.

Our section of Prowlers briefed for a night strike in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. At the outset, we knew the weather would be challenging.

Weather briefing

Our weather brief showed thunderstorms along our route, low clouds and a milky soup bowl below us from the surface to the upper teens, which meant our only refuge was in the lower 20s.

I launched for the strike and my wingman, Dash 2, joined me as I tried my best to pick through the weather. Knowing Dash 2 was doing his best to stay with me through the rain and turbulence, we finally cried uncle, separated and agreed to meet up at the refueling tanker.

He climbed, attempting to get over the storm, which is where most of the air wing elected to go. With my wingman detached, I felt a little more comfortable driving through this storm.

What none of us really knew from the weather brief was that we would have to push through



SUBMITTED PHOTO

DESTROYED NOSE

This is a photo of Lt. Kevin Hendricks' plane after the implosion of the jet's nose. The damage occurred during a flight just south of Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

two squall lines to get to our tanker. So as we punched through the first squall, I thought I could pick my way around the major cells using night vision goggles (NVG's) since we did not have a weather radar.

Long story short, I found myself in the heart of a major thunderstorm.

Damaging hail

The cloud-to-cloud lightning was so severe that I had to take off my NVG's and focus on the instruments. You could hear the hail blasting the jet over the sound of the engines, wind and radios — everything!

On the radios we could hear other jets in the upper 40s still fighting the weather, so I ruled out trying to climb and decided I needed to get out of the storm immediately. I descended, finally making it to clear air after a very rough ride.

We made it through, but knew the jet had taken a beating from the hail.

Regardless, we were still at war and we had other pilots relying on us to support them. We attempted to complete our mission and while maneuvering in a jamming orbit, we felt a "thump" and knew something was wrong with the jet.

There was a loud rush of air surrounding the nose and a vibration that could be felt throughout the jet. After a quick glance, we were relieved to see two working motors; after assessing the damage, we decided we hadn't encountered enemy fire.

We didn't know what had happened, but we knew it was time to go home.

Still need gas

The only problem was that, somehow, we had to fly around the same storm on our way back to the ship. We also desperately needed to find a refueling tanker.

The tankers overhead the ship were fighting the same storm and this added to the difficulty of finessing the jet into the



SUBMITTED PHOTO

MILITARY COUPLE

Gail Hendricks, left, greets her husband, Lt. Kevin Hendricks, after a flight. The Hendricks now live in Meridian, where Kevin is a flight instructor at Naval Air Station Meridian.

refueling basket. We decided to perform landing checks prior to tanking and, of course, found that the right main landing gear was not down and locked.

Setting that problem aside, I joined with our tanker and fought my way into a very stubborn refueling basket. At this point, we had fuel but still had a foggy, stormy night carrier landing ahead.

Fortunately, our landing gear was now down and locked after bouncing through the storm getting our gas. We figured that we had seen the worst of this memorable flight, but we were wrong.

Final approach

On our final approach, the Landing Signal Officer (LSO) could not see our jet and informed us that all of our external lights were out. It was obviously due to the hail.

I verified that my navigation lights were on and turned on my taxi light, which is not normally used because it blinds the LSO's on final approach. The taxi light was challenging because it made our descent like driving through

the fog with our high beams on. However, in this situation, it was the only way to make our jet visible for our landing.

Obviously not ideal circumstances, but we made it aboard.

As we were shutting down, we noticed the ground crew crowding around the jet. We jumped out and found that our radome had imploded — which essentially meant that the whole nose of the jet was gone.

There was other hail damage to the rest of the plane. We just shook our heads and wondered how we were able to make it back. The entire crew did an excellent job and not one of them will forget that flight during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Two months later, I was back at Whidbey Island, Wash., safe and sound.

It's good to be home with my wife and family, but I often think about my fellow squadron mates who continue to fight for our freedom and offer support for tsunami victims. My job is demanding and sometimes risky, but the opportunity to serve this country is satisfying beyond words.